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Realising the Olympic Dream: Vision, Support and Challenge

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The sporting arena is replete with examples and anecdotes of inspirational coaches that have led teams to success, often in the face of adversity and against seemingly better opponents. Indeed, the influence of the coach is summarised nicely by Dan Britton talking about the legendary basketball Coach John Wooden: “His purpose in coaching was to instil greatness in others. He was committed to teaching, inspiring and motivating people, and he empowered his players to do great things” (p. 13). It is therefore surprising that the models of leadership and coaching in sport are either devoid of the notion of inspiration or only give it a passing mention; we still know very little about precisely why great coaches are great and how in turn they motivate their athletes to achieve Olympic greatness. For example, the sport coaching models developed by Challadurai and colleagues; Smith, Smoll and colleagues; Horn and colleagues; and Côté and colleagues have all provided an insight into the effects of coach behaviours, some processes and mechanisms by which these behaviours exert their influence and the moderating effects of situation, context, and personality. However, there is very little mention of the inspirational effects of great coaches in these theories and models. The purpose of this article is not to provide a review of the sport coaching models (for reviews, see Chelladurai, 1990, 1993, 2007; Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998; Riemer, 2007; Smith & Smoll, 2007), rather we will delineate a new model of inspirational coaching based on the principles of vision, support, and challenge.

Underpinned by transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) the meta-cognitive model of *vision*, *support*, and *challenge* was first developed by Hardy and Arthur in a

military context (e.g., Arthur, 2008; Arthur & Hardy, 2011; Arthur, Hardy, & Wagstaff, 2010; Hardy & Arthur, 2006, 2008; Hardy, Arthur, Jones, Shariff, Munnoch, & Isaacs, 2010; Hardy, Shariff, Munnoch, & Allsopp, 2004). The model posits that *great* coaches inspire their athletes by: (a) creating an inspirational *vision* of the future; (b) providing the necessary *support* to achieve the vision; and (c) providing the *challenge* to achieve the vision. The underlying proposition is that the vision provides meaning and direction for athletes' effort. That is, the vision serves as the beacon towards which all the sweat, pain and sacrifice is directed on the path to Olympic success. The premise that underpins the *vision, support* and *challenge* model is that athletes can achieve their Olympic dreams provided they are truly inspired to do so; this is because all other things being equal the person who is motivated to practice longer and train harder will ultimately be the best.

An important aspect of the vision, support, and challenge model is that it makes a distinction between what the coach does (i.e., coach behaviours) and the consequences of these coach behaviours (i.e., athlete's meta-cognitions) in the same model. That is, transformational leadership is what the coach does and athlete's perceptions of vision, support, and challenge are a direct consequence of coach behaviours. In the following article we firstly define the vision, support, and challenge constructs in our model, we then describe the impact that vision, support and challenge will have, and lastly we very briefly identify some key coach behaviours that we theorize will predict athlete's perceptions of vision, support, and challenge.

Vision

Primarily based on the charismatic and transformational leadership literatures, *vision* is defined as *the extent to which athletes have an inspirational and meaningful future image of themselves in their sport*. Whilst vision has occupied a central role in leadership theories

from organizational psychology (e.g., Bass, 1985; Berlew, 1974; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Kim, Dansereau, & Kim, 2002; Nanus, 1992) it is only recently emerging in the sport psychology literature. For example, Vallee and Bloom (2005) identified vision as one of the four higher-order themes that the expert coaches identified in their study. This finding has been replicated in other qualitative designs with vision being identified as a key component of success (e.g., Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, & Jeffrey, 2012; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Furthermore, empirical evidence is also beginning to emerge from the sport transformational leadership literature where inspirational motivation has been shown to predict extra effort and group cohesion (e.g., Arthur, Woodman, Ong, Hardy, & Ntoumanis, 2011; Callow, Smith, Hardy, Arthur, & Hardy, 2009). The coach is thought to play a fundamental role in inspiring athletes by imparting a positive vision of the future. The strength of the athlete's vision will then be a key determinant of their motivation to work and train hard for the Olympic Games.

It is hypothesized that the transformational leader behaviours of inspirational motivation and fostering acceptance of group goals will predict vision. This is subtly different from the military model of vision, support and challenge; in the military model we hypothesize that appropriate role modelling will predict vision. This is because in the military context the follower's vision are likely to be formulated around their direct leader because their leader is normally at the next stage of leadership in the organization, hence the follower is likely to be promoted into that leadership role. However, in the sport context the coach is less likely to serve as the future image of the athlete. Consequently, role modelling is not theorized to predict vision in the sport model.

Support

Athletes need *support* in order to achieve their vision and to believe that the vision is attainable. A brief review of the social support literature (e.g., Blazer, 1982; Cohen & Wills,

1985; House, 1971; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Rees & Hardy, 2000; Rees & Hardy, 2004; Rees, Hardy, & Evans, 2007; Sandler & Berrera, 1984; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990) suggests that support is multidimensional in nature. The precise number and nature of the sub-dimensions is the subject of some debate (see, for example, Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Rees & Hardy, 2004; Rees et al., 2007) but evidence suggests that support includes emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible aspects (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Rees & Hardy, 2004). Another important consideration born out of the social support literature is the notion of received and perceived availability of support. That is, in order to capture the full spectrum of social support one needs to measure both received and perceived availability of support. Based on the literature, the definition of support is: *the extent to which emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support is provided or is perceived as being available when needed.*

It is proposed that perceptions of support will help athletes to believe that their vision of Olympic success is achievable and that perceptions of support will contribute to athletes' feeling valued and important. The relationship between support and job satisfaction is described within the social exchange theory framework (e.g., Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Social exchange theory suggests that people will respond positively to favourable treatment; that is, perceived favourable treatment (e.g., perceptions of support) will be reciprocated with positive affective outcomes (c.f. Gouldner, 1960). In a related vein organizational support theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Shore & Shore, 1995) posits that the extent to which employees' socio-emotional needs are met will impact global beliefs that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. Supporting the above theoretical links a meta-analysis (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) found a strong positive relationship between perceived support and job satisfaction in 21 independent samples.

It is proposed that the leader behaviours of individual consideration, inspirational motivation, and appropriate role modelling will load onto the support component of the model. That is, the more coaches display these behaviours the more supported their athletes will feel.

Challenge

The notion of *challenge* has received considerably less research attention. A notable exception to this is the challenge and hindrance stressor differentiation literature (see LePine, LePine, & Jackson, 2004; Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). This theoretical perspective posits that there are two different types of stress in the workplace: *hindrance stress* and *challenge stress*. *Hindrance stress* includes role ambiguity, role conflict, and hassles that are negatively related to performance (Beehr, Jex, Stacy, & Murray, 2000; Fox, Spector, & Mills, 2001; LePine et al., 2004; Podsakoff et al., 2007; Villanova, 1996; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). *Challenge stress* includes work demands and workload, which are positively related to performance (Beehr et al., 2000; Beehr, Walsh, & Taber, 1976; LePine et al., 2004; Podsakoff et al., 2007). It is the challenge component of the hindrance-challenge stress model that is of particular salience to the *vision*, *support*, and *challenge* model. Podsakoff et al. state that leaders who have high performance expectations of their followers and who set goals that stretch their followers will challenge their followers by increasing the magnitude of the discrepancy between a follower's current state and a future desired state. In Olympic terms, the gap between an athlete's current performance and the performance needed for Olympic success will be clearer to the athlete if the coach emphasizes the Olympic expectations with ever more challenging goals. Consequently, the definition of challenge is: *an understanding of what needs to be done in order to achieve goals and the gap between current state and a future desired state, with the implicit assumption that the larger the discrepancy the more challenged followers are.*

Whilst the positive effects of *challenge* might not be as intuitively obvious as the positive impact of vision and support there are some literatures that exhort the positive effects of challenge. For example, Seyle (1978) proposed that humans engaging in stressful and challenging activities often express enjoyment, even euphoria; McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison (1988) suggested that employees thrive when they have challenging job demands; and Campion and McClelland (1991) suggested that challenging job designs are associated with higher levels of satisfaction and involvement. Furthermore, several studies have reported a positive relationship between job challenges and affective outcomes such as satisfaction (e.g., Beehr, Glaser, Canali, & Wallwey, 2001; Dwyer & Ganster, 1991; Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000). Consequently, there is good reason to believe that challenge will motivate athletes to train harder toward their Olympic aspirations.

It is proposed that the transformational leader behaviours of high performance expectations and intellectual stimulation will predict athlete's perception of challenge. In other words, the more the coach displays these behaviours the greater the perceptions of challenge their athletes will have.

Summary

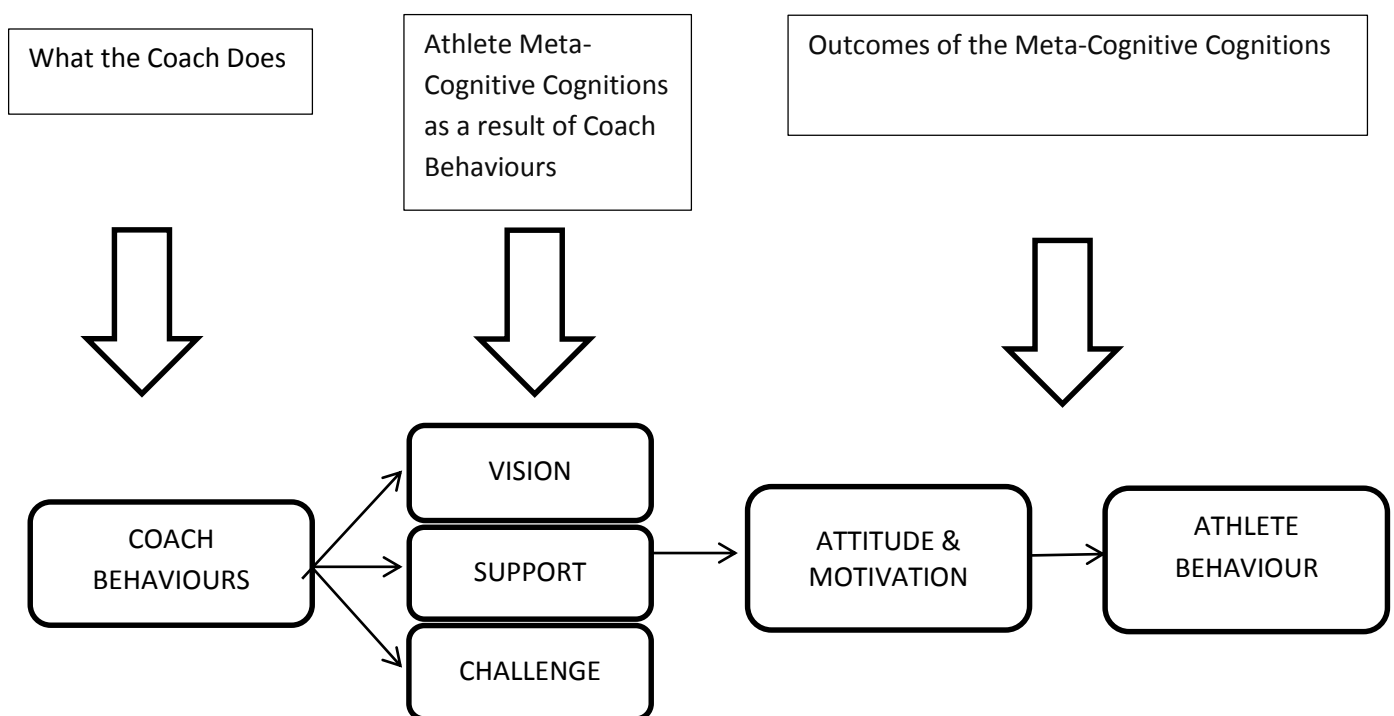
Olympic greatness will be achieved by the coach instilling a combination of *vision*, *support*, and *challenge* in their athletes. The coach is at the centre of this process and will be a determining factor in creating the vision and shaping the athlete's perceptions of challenge and support. Clearly, athlete and context play a significant role. For example, athlete optimism may mediate or moderate the likelihood of athletes adopting the vision; and narcissism may impact the content of the vision to reflect some of the core personality factors associated with narcissism (e.g., personal glory). Equally, the support and the level of challenge may need to be adjusted for those athletes lower in self-esteem. The relative

quantity and quality of support and challenge will also likely have an impact. For example, very high levels of challenge accompanied with very little support will increase the likelihood of athlete burn-out and withdrawal from sport. Conversely, high levels of support accompanied with low levels of challenge will likely lead to de-motivation because of boredom.

Most athletes train for the Olympic Games with dreams of Olympic glory. Coaches who can provide the right balance of *vision*, *support*, and *challenge* will inspire their athletes to realize that dream and achieve Olympic greatness.

Figure 1.

Vision, Support, and Challenge Model



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